



## Using Witchcraft to Murder and Rape

Robert Priest | June 29, 2015

Yesterday I received an urgent email from a good friend, the President of an indigenous evangelical denomination among the Aguaruna of Peru, with whom I worked closely many years ago. I would like to translate his letter here into English, using pseudonyms, and provide commentary on the way witchcraft issues continue to play out among evangelical Christians in this South American community. The subject heading for my friend's email was "Persecution."

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*My dear brothers in Jesus Christ,*

*Some time ago our brother Pedro Ampush, the Director of our Bible Institute, began to be accused of criminal acts. There were many accusations. Some say that he had copies of books about the occult that he received from the missionary Jurgens Schmidt. Others report that shamans have revealed that Pedro practices witchcraft. Others report that when they take (the hallucinogenic drug) Ayahuasca, they are enabled to discern through visions that Pedro is responsible for having caused community deaths. Others report that women wake up startled, realizing they've been mysteriously raped.*

*In the village of Nuevo Victoria, on the Marañon river, a village Assembly was held on May 31 (2015) to consider the matter. As President of the Church Association I was present to witness this Assembly, as was Rafael Chamikag, the Coordinator of our church. I was amazed when I saw that the conflict on either side — both for Pedro and against him — was so intense that I feared physical violence would ensue.*

*Therefore my brothers, I ask your prayers. The conflict is community vs. church, darkness vs. light, Christ against Satan. If you are praying for me and want to send me a message of encouragement, I would welcome it.*

God bless you.

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## Some observations

Since I live a long way from Nuevo Victoria, I have no easy way to check on exactly what is happening. But since I lived in a similar Aguaruna village, and saw similar patterns play out repeatedly, this case will allow me to highlight a few of the patterns I observed in my time with the Aguaruna.

### **1. The event presupposes the belief that misfortune may be best explained as caused by witchcraft.**

First, as a backdrop to this event, is the presupposition that misfortunes and deaths are best explained as caused by some person in the community who is a secret witch. In Aguaruna culture, the accused is virtually always a man. Apparently there have been deaths in this community, and thus it is likely that someone would have been accused of being a witch, whether or not Pedro was present to be considered.

### **2. By fear of being accused, people are motivated to deflect suspicion away from themselves.**

Second, with every death there are likely to be a wide variety of individuals who might easily be suspected of harboring ill will towards the deceased, and thus of having bewitched them. And since every death will be attributed to some person said to be a witch, a person who in the traditional system ought to then be killed, there will be many individuals working hard to deflect possible suspicion off of themselves and onto some other party. That is, a lot of people are highly motivated to persuade others that someone else is to blame, not them.

*My friend implies that Satan is at work, not in the person who is accused of being a witch, but in the community that is doing the accusing.*

### **3. Because of the regional nature of the School, the director is more likely to be an outsider.**

Third, since a Bible school exists for a whole region, but is physically located in one specific village, it is fairly common for the Bible School Director to be originally from some other village. That is, this Director is more likely than other village residents to be an outsider to the village, and thus more likely to be suspected and accused. Men with strong respected family ties within the village are seldom accused.

### **4. Those who know much about witchcraft are often accused of being witches.**

Fourth, any Christian who claims to know too much about witchcraft will often be accused of being a witch

themselves. During my fieldwork I learned that the missionary Jurgens Schmidt had prepared and distributed to a few Aguaruna leaders a manual and books on spiritual warfare. It is likely then that Pedro did have books from Jurgens Schmidt on the occult (that is, Christian books on spiritual warfare), and that this was taken as evidence that he had a special interest in, and knowledge about, witchcraft. And since knowledge is "for use," one can assume that anyone who knows very much about witchcraft is himself probably using such knowledge for evil. That is, he is probably a witch himself.

### **5. It is important to ask in all accusations, "Who benefits?"**

Fifth, it is worth pointing out that at the village level most Aguaruna live with a great deal of poverty. There are a couple men with official positions within the Aguaruna church association (the President and the Bible Institute Director) who regularly interact with Christians and organizations from distant places, and often in contexts where resources are being shared. That is, these individuals function as key brokers where significant resources are being shared for the Bible School or church association.

In my time with the Aguaruna I was favorably impressed with the integrity and quality of many top Aguaruna Christian leaders, but again and again the time would

eventually come for every such leader where others would start to slander and attack them as part of a larger effort to replace them. The accusation of witchcraft is simply one of several common successful accusations that over the years have been leveled at the church leaders which others wish to oust. In a couple cases I examined, the key people spreading stories about the accused were often closely related to some alternative candidate for the same position. That is, a key question to ask is, "who benefits if people accept this accusation as true?" While the above letter might easily lead one to infer that the conflict involved Christians against non-Christians. In actual fact, almost certainly, Christians are also involved on both sides of the conflict.

#### **6. Shamans are not neutral and reliable parties.**

Sixth, since the Aguaruna believe witches operate purely in the psychic and spiritual realm, with no outwardly visible rituals for others to observe, then the ability to determine who is a witch requires extraordinary abilities. The Aguaruna traditionally accept an epistemology in which shamans have special abilities to discover and reveal the truth about witches, and in which those who take hallucinogenic herbs (such as *Banisteriopsis caapi*, or *Brugmansia suaveolens*) are able to perceive the ultimate truth about what happens in the spiritual realm. And since a Bible Institute Director represents a religious authority that directly threatens the authority of the shaman (the traditional healer/diviner), we should not consider shamans as neutral and objective parties when they accuse the Bible Institute Director of being a witch. From a Christian epistemology, non-Christian shamans either have no supernatural knowledge of who is truly a witch, and thus should not be trusted, or they do have ideas genuinely acquired from the master deceiver, and thus should not be trusted. In either case, they are not neutral and reliable parties to the accusation that a pastor is truly a witch. They should not be trusted.

#### **7. Gossip and accusations grow larger and further from evidence with retelling.**

Seventh, once gossip and accusations begin, people cooperate in adding layer upon layer of supposed evidence. I observed repeatedly similar processes, whether the accusation was of witchcraft, or of some other supposed evil. That is, I observed stories being elaborated, added to, and propagated that sometimes involved outright lies. Again and again, after someone was eventually proved innocent of some accusation, I heard the Aguaruna refer to the expanding explosion of accusations, lies and slanders directed towards that person as *tsuwat chicham* – "dirty speech." The Aguaruna easily understand the account of the snowballing accusations directed towards Jesus prior to his crucifixion, accusations they rightly understand as "tsuwat chicham."

#### **8. Witchcraft is often the explanation of poorly understood phenomena.**

Finally, sometimes poorly understood phenomena are appealed to as evidence of a witch at work. In my own fieldwork repeatedly I heard references to women, without a man being anywhere near them, awakening mysteriously from an orgasm/wet dream – an event interpreted as evidence of some kind of preternatural sexual rape. Only recently has science begun to understand that this is a not-uncommon natural phenomenon for many women.

This letter from my Aguaruna friend invites us to understand that Satan is at work in this situation where everyone is talking about witchcraft. He does not quote Scripture, but he clearly believes that Satan does his work as master deceiver (John 8:44) and "accuser of the brethren" (Revelation 12:10). That is, my friend implies that Satan is at work, not in the person who is accused of being a witch, but in the community that is doing the accusing. While I think it can be a little presumptuous to ascribe Satanic motives to those with whom we disagree, I do think there is wisdom in recognizing in the context of witch accusations that the accused is not necessarily guilty, and that it might well be self-righteous accusers who are truly doing the work of the great accuser, Satan.

In any case, my friend invites our prayers. So I invite you to join me in prayer for him and the situation he faces. I also invite you to pray for wisdom for all of us participating in our conversation of this difficult topic on this *Sapientia* website.

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**Robert Priest** is the G. W. Aldeen Professor of International Studies and Professor of Mission and Anthropology at TEDS. His research interests include ethnicity, short-term missions, witchcraft, preaching and culture, money and missions, and religious conversion.

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